

Native American Oral Histories: Leona Begay

EM: This is Elizabeth McKee, of the Sacramento Ethnic Community Survey, talking with Mrs. Leona Begay at my home in Sacramento on December 3rd, 1983. Mrs. Begay talks of her childhood near Merced, California, her education in the area and in Oakland, her move to Sacramento in 1950, her involvement with the Federated Indians of California, and her association with the Sacramento Indian Center.

EM: Mrs. Begay, when were you born?

LB: February 23, 1931.

EM: Where were you born?

LB: I was born in Merced, California.

EM: What were your parents' names?

LB: Rose Maiz Miranda, my mother's name, and my father was Felix Miranda.

EM: What was their tribal affiliation?

LB: My father was Paiute and Tubatulabal, and my mother was Paiute.

EM: Could you tell me about your grandparents?

LB: I just remember my grandfather. He was very old, and he was crippled, and he raised sheep.

EM: And his name was?

LB: His name was Steven Miranda.

EM: And where did he live?

LB: He lived in Weldon, California. Right near the foothills.

EM: What religion did he practice?

LB: Well, he was Catholic, but he was also practicing Indian religion.

EM: What languages did he speak?

LB: He spoke Tubatulabal, and he also spoke Spanish language.

EM: Did he speak English?

LB: No, he didn't speak English.

EM: Do you know anything about his education?

LB: No, I don't remember if he had an education in the public school. No, I don't believe he did.

EM: How were your parents raised?

LB: Well, my mother was raised up in the Cowsill Valley, and as a child, she lost her parents, and her relatives raised her, and then she was sent to a boarding school in Sherman. And that's where she got her education. My father went to the third grade at Weldon.

EM: In the public school?

LB: Yes.

EM: What languages did your parents speak?

LB: Well, in the home, they spoke English. My father spoke Indian language with his sister and brother and his father.

EM: How did your father make a living?

LB: Well, he raised grains and he also did farm work for other people. Ranch work, that is.

EM: Did he own any property?

LB: Well, he was an heir on the 160 acres, and he raised crops there, on the land.

EM: And this was near Weldon?

LB: Near Weldon, yeah. He had mules, and he would plow the fields, and he would plant potatoes and grain, and vegetables.

EM: Did your mother ever work outside the home?

LB: She did some housework for some people she knew, and that's about it.

EM: Can you describe your childhood home?

LB: Well, my home was, um, it was small, it was made of wood, and we had kerosene lamps, and we had an outhouse. And we would carry our water down from the spring. And we would have to go out and chop our wood, and bring in the wood from the hills <laughs>.

EM: What languages did you speak as a child?

LB: I spoke English, and my father, uh, mother taught me a few Indian words.

EM: What words might those be?

LB: Let me think back. *Paw* was water. And, um, and *wo* meant two. And, right at the moment I can't think.

EM: What religion did your family practice?

LB: Well, they were Catholic.

EM: Was there a church in Weldon?

LB: Yes, there was a little country church that we used to go to, in Weldon.

EM: Were all the parishioners Indian, or were there other parishioners?

LB: There were non-Indian, uh, parishers (sic).

EM: Also?

LB: Uh, the priests were, were, were not Indians. But the people that attended church were, were, there were a lot of Indians.

EM: Was, by any chance, the priest Irish?

LB: Yes, there was, um, Father O'Connell. He was Irish <laughs>.

EM: Did your family, um, eat any traditional foods?

LB: Yes, my mother used to make gooseberry jelly. And she used to go up in the hills and pick little seeds called chia. And there was also other foods they got from the hills, that they gathered. And the also ate pine nuts, roasted them, in the oven.

EM: Did she go to the hills alone, or with children, or with friends?

LB: Well she went with her children.

EM: Did you celebrate, um, Christmas holidays?

LB: Yes, we celebrated Christmas holidays, and un, like everybody else. But we were poor, and there were times when we didn't get to celebrate.

EM: Did you celebrate Fourth of July and Thanksgiving?

LB: Yes we did. Just like all the rest, we celebrated. We were taught that in school.

EM: What was your education like?

LB: Well, I went to an elementary school in, at Merced. Then we moved to back to Weldon, when I was a child, around 10, and I went to elementary school there at Southfork Valley. Then I went to, uh, two years of high school at Kernville. And they built that dam, and so we had to go elsewhere to finish our last two years of high school. So I was sent to Oakland by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and they gave me a place to live down there, and settled there. And after that, I, my father died, and then I came to Sacramento, and lived in a home with Dr. Kleinsorge and his family, and went to City College for two years.

EM: What year was this that you came to Sacramento?

LB: It was 1950.

EM: And how exactly did you get to Sacramento?

LB: Well, I got to Sacramento by, by bus.

EM: Did you come alone?

LB: Yes.

EM: When you were sent to Oakland, were you the only child sent to Oakland?

LB: Yes. And it was very strange for me, to be in a big city like that. I was so used to be out in the country, or the rural area, and to see all these strange people from different lands. It was very exciting.

EM: Did you ever go into San Francisco while you were there?

LB: Yes, I met some people in San Francisco, and I used to go over there on weekends, be with my friends.

EM: What sort of places did you go to in San Francisco?

LB: We went to a place called Toyland at the Beach. We enjoyed the walking around the beaches. And we enjoyed the carnival that they had. I don't believe they have it anymore.

EM: Did you know any other Indian people in the Bay Area?

LB: Yes, we went to a place called the Four Winds. And they used to have Christmas dinners, Thanksgiving dinners, and it was at the YWCA. And, um, I didn't feel so lonesome that way when I was with other people.

EM: Was this in San Francisco?

LB: It was in Oakland. But they had picnics in San Francisco also, and I got to attend those events.

EM: Why weren't other children from Weldon sent to the Bay Area?

LB: Well we were sent to different areas. Some of the children were sent to Sherman Indian School, and some were sent to Bakersfield, and I was sent to Oakland. It was wherever they could find places for us.

EM: Did you have any choice in the matter?

LB: Well, I wanted to go to Sherman so I be with the other Indian children and not be so lonesome. But I was sent to Oakland instead. But I'm happy, though, that it worked out this way, and I got my education. I'm satisfied.

EM: What was your first impression of Sacramento, as you arrived?

LB: Well, I thought it was, un, the weather was very changeable, and it didn't always stay hot in the summer. You got this Delta breeze. And, uh, I liked Sacramento. I had intended to only stay temporarily until I finished my education, but I continued to live here. I enjoy it here.

EM: Where did you meet people when you first got here?

LB: Well, they had a, a place in Bryte where they used to hold dances, where Indian people went, and I used to go over there, and I enjoyed those places, being around our people. And, I got to meet more people. And I met Marie Potts in Sacramento. And I enjoyed helping her with a paper she put out called The Smoke Signal, and also her group called the Federated Indians of California. They were the ones that put the dances on at Bryte.

EM: Could you describe, um, the place where they met in Bryte?

LB: Well the dance place, was a, it was a VFW hall.

EM: Do you remember what street it was on?

LB: I think it's a street called Lisbon Street. And they used to hold benefit dances there to raise money for their organization.

EM: What kind of dancing did they do?

LB: Well it was, uh, sometimes it was Indian dancing. And they also had a regular dance group, dance bands from different places.

EM: They had live bands?

LB: Yes, they did. <laughs>

EM: How did you get to these dances? Did you have a car?

LB: No, I didn't have a car. But I would go with friends, or I would go with Marie Potts. And I enjoyed helping her with her paper.

EM: Do you remember the years these dances were held?

LB: Well, they were held in 1950, 51, 1952.

EM: Could you describe working with Mrs. Potts on the newspaper?

LB: Yes, I used to cut stencils for her, and she would give me the news articles to type, and announcements of whatever, and I would type them on the stencils. And she would print off hundreds and hundreds of uh, of uh prints, and ship them off to different places, to different subscribers. Even to Alaska, and Germany, and Sweden. From all parts of the country, they all subscribed to her paper.

EM: Where was this paper published?

LB: It was published at her home, on 2727 Santa Clara Way.

EM: And what years did you help her with the paper?

LB: It was in 1952, and 1953. Well, I helped her clear up to the time she, she died.

EM: Did you belong to Federated Indians of California?

LB: Yes, I belonged to it.

EM: What other activities happened besides the dances in Bryte and the Smoke Signals newspaper?

LB: Well, one time there was a reburial. At Kadema, reburial. I attended that. And I remember the reverend George Effman officiated, he's an Indian minister. It was a very unusual event.

EM: Can you describe that day?

LB: Well, there were a lot of people there. There were the descendants of the ones who, the remains that were to be reburied. And, uh, he said some prayers. And, uh, after it was over with, we had a picnic, and it was in Oak Park. We had a big picnic, and there were a lot of people there.

EM: Do you remember the date of this event?

LB: Not right off. It was a few years ago?

EM: And, where was the reburial held?

LB: It was at a, at a church here in Sacramento.

EM: Do you remember which church that was?

LB: I don't remember right off.

EM: Do you remember some of the names of the other people that were there?

LB: Marie Potts was there. Alice Potts, and Marvin Potts, and Elizabeth Paddy was there.

EM: Were there any other Federal, um, Federated Indians of California events happening?

LB: You mean, that I attended?

EM: Mm, hm. That you knew about.

LB: Well, we had the meetings at her house.

EM: Who would attend those meetings?

LB: Well, there were members of our organization, and the officers. I remember Gerald Paiute Davis, and I remember Rebecca and Harold McEnesy. And the Tripp family from Ukiah, they would come down to attend the meetings.

EM: What other Indian organizations did you belong to?

LB: Well, I belonged to, there was the one called the Assembly for California Indian Women, and that was involved with education and, uh, legal, legal aid.

EM: When was that formed?

LB: That was formed about, about four years ago. And um, at one time, they held a luncheon for the elders at the Sacramento Indian Center, and they called on me to help, and I prepared some food. And when I went down there, they had deer meat, deer stew, and all the women got together and cooked food for the elders, to feed the elders. And it was quite an event.

EM: What address was the Sacramento Indian Center at, at that time?

LB: At that time, it was down at 19th and F Street.

EM: And at that time, what, what were some of the, some of the names of the people involved?

LB: There was May Dividian, and there was Luana Quidiquit, was her name, and there was, um, well there was, um, I'm trying to think of the other names, um, I can't think right now.

EM: Can you tell me some more about the Sacramento Indian Center, such as, when you first became involved?

LB: Well, I first became involved when it was down at 9th and J Street. I used to go down there and volunteer. They used to have a clothes closet down there. And uh, and they used to put on Halloween parties, and Christmas parties, Thanksgiving, and, and I used to go down there and help as much as I could.

EM: Do you remember some of the people who were involved when it was at that location?

LB: Well, there was the director, George Bear Cloud, and his wife, Colleen Bear Cloud. And there was the secretary, Melanie was her name, Melanie Smiley. And Wayne Redhorse, and Leo Camp. And, um, and I remember Sheryl Bear.

EM: Were there any, um, traditional Indian activities held also?

LB: Yes, George Bear Cloud used to have the Plains Indian dances. And there were the, like the Miwok people who did the hand games, and their traditional dancing.

EM: Now, about what years was it at this location?

LB: Oh, I believe it was about, uh, I think it was about 12 years ago.

EM: Why exactly did you get involved? Or how exactly did you get involved? Did you know someone?

LB: Uh, yes, I knew someone that was, and they took me down there, and I found out they needed volunteer help. So I helped out as much as I could, because I like to help people who are in need. You can always use the help.

EM: Did you ever hold a position in any of these organizations? Were you ever an officer?

LB: Well at that time, I was on the board. I was a member of their board, and attended their meetings.

EM: In the early years.

LB: Yes.

EM: Are you still on their board?

LB: Yes, I'm still on their board.

EM: Who else is on the board currently?

LB: Well, Carl Matheson is the chairman. Juliana George is the treasurer. And, uh, of course, I'm the, sort of an outgoing secretary, because of all my situations at home, and transportation is one of the problems in getting there. And, uh, Helen Arnell is on the board. Hank Smith, is on there. And Marvin Marine was on the board, uh no not Marvin, I'm sorry, Joe, his brother, but he moved out of town, so he's off the board.

EM: How often does the board meet?

LB: Well, it's uh, they haven't met for a while, but it's usually once a month.

EM: During the early 70's, did you attend any, um, ceremonies, or big times, or, you might call them, pow wows, um, outside of the Indian Center?

LB: Yes, I've attended the hand game tournaments in, um, up at Chelsea Park, and um, and watched their traditional dancing, and, and uh, participated in their barbecues. And I really enjoyed it up there. And then we'd sometimes go to DQ University, and I enjoyed their pow wow.

EM: Did you ever learn hand games as a child?

LB: No, I didn't. But my father, and relatives knew how to play hand games.

EM: When would they play these games?

LB: Well, whenever they'd get together with friends.

EM: Would this be on a regular basis, or holidays, or family gatherings?

LB: It was family gatherings.

EM: Did you learn any traditional dancing as a child?

LB: Uh, no, I didn't.

EM: Did your parents ever do any?

LB: Um, no, they didn't.

EM: What kind of dances were held?

LB: Well, they had, my father played the violin and guitar. My uncle played the violin and guitar. My aunt played the guitar. And their friends played instruments. And they'd sometimes have a family gathering, and we'd have music. It was really enjoyable listening to them play.

EM: Can you describe one of these family gatherings?

LB: Well, it was during Thanksgiving, my mother prepared a big meal, and um, the relatives had their instruments out there, and they played music.

EM: Where would you dance?

LB: Oh, well, it was at our little house. In our little house, we had music. And we listened to the music while they played. My father used to also play for the barn dances.

EM: And what's a barn dance?

LB: Well, it's where the people all gathered from all around, and hold a big dance, in a hall.

EM: And would this be just Indian people?

LB: It would be for everybody, in the Valley.

EM: So the whole community?

LB: Yeah.

EM: Did you attend Catholic church when you came to Sacramento?

LB: Uh, well yes, I attended the big one down at 11th and K Street, the big cathedral.

EM: Did you attend any other churches, here?

LB: Well, if I was invited with friends, I would attend other churches. In fact, there's a American Indian church that's held on Sundays, and they have different Indian ministers. The last one I went to was

Reverend George Effman. He plays the guitar and he can sing in Sioux language. And, uh, he can also, well he sings in regular English. And he preaches, and sometimes they have a potluck.

EM: And where is this church held?

LB: It's held at Interfaith Bureau, on Folsom Boulevard.

EM: Um, are these Christian ceremonies?

LB: Yes, they are.

EM: Do you know some of the other people who attend?

LB: Yes, there's Chuck Tolboy and his family, and there's uh, Bertha Norton, and, um, and sometimes the ladies from Auburn Rancheria come down. And, uh...

EM: Is Mr. Tallboy a California Indian?

LB: He's Kiowa. He also plays the drum, and sings in Kiowa. His name is Chuck Toybull. But it's good to see all the people there at church. They're very friendly, down to earth.

EM: Did you ever go to any activities down in the Bay Area, from here?

LB: Uh, well, I went to the Oakland Indian Center, and they had a luncheon in the evening one time, we went down there.

EM: You say we?

LB: My, well, my family.

EM: And when was this?

LB: This was about, about, about two years ago.

EM: Are you married?

LB: Yes, I'm married.

EM: How did you meet your husband?

LB: Well, I came to Sacramento, I met him here in town, and uh...

EM: Do you remember, where?

LB: Well, it was at a friend's house, and uh, he works for the Western Pacific Railroad.

EM: Do you know what his work entails?

LB: Well, he's a, repairing the tracks, he's a machine operator. Operators a tamper, and I don't know what else.

EM: Could you tell me a little something about his background?

LB: Yes, he was raised on a reservation in Arizona called Four Corners, or Rock Point. And, uh, he was um, raised a traditional way. His mother died when he was quite young, I'd say around 8, and his father

died when he was about 16. And so, he had to leave the reservation to find work to support himself. So, he's very independent.

EM: What's his tribal background?

LB: He's Navajo Tribe. He speaks it, and he can sing. And, uh, he's very traditional.

EM: Could you tell me what some of these traditions are?

LB: For my husband's side of the family? And what I just told you? Well, he told me that, uh, when the, when the, when the children reach the adolescence, going into teenagers, they have a, a big feast for them. They make them run, or they do, they run several miles, and when they come back, they have a, a big, big feast because that's quite an event in their lives, to become adolescents.

EM: Did he go through the coming of age ceremony himself?

LB: I don't remember if he told me that.

EM: Can you describe any way of him being traditional in your home life?

LB: Well, he says his prayers in Indian. Um, he has prayers for morning, and afternoon, and evening. And, uh, in the winter, winter time, he sings certain, um, songs that are Indian religion songs, that cannot be sung during the summer. And during the summer, he has, uh, songs that he can sing. There's songs for about everything in, in his tribal life.

EM: Did he teach any of these ways to his children?

LB: Uh, no, he didn't, uh...

EM: How many children do you have?

LB: We have five children.

EM: Do you have any grandchildren?

LB: Yes, I have two girls and two boys.

EM: Do your children have any contact, or have they ever visited their parents' ho-, um, the places where their parents were born?

LB: Yes, they've uh, at my home, where I was, where I am from, they enjoyed, uh, up there in the hills, they enjoyed roaming the hills, places where I had gone, and told them about. And they enjoyed their father's, uh, place back at Rock Point. They went for rides all over the hills back there, and, uh, met other people, his relatives, and friends. And they really enjoyed it. Different.

EM: Did your children ever go to the Sacramento Indian Center with you?

LB: Yes they did. They went to, uh, like the Christmas parties and the, uh, Halloween parties, to their picnics. And they, they've enjoyed it.

EM: Have they ever been involved in any organizations?

LB: They were involved in the Indian Education Program. About two years ago, we went on a field trip to the Tule River Reservation for about a week. We camped out there, in the campground. And they went swimming out there, and hiking. And they also, there was also an event going on out there, that weekend. It was at Chabolup Camp, it was way up in the hills, at Tule River. They had a Medicine Man there and it was a religious ceremony. And, but the children had a lot of fun because there was a river nearby where they could swim. And everything was so pretty up there, in the hills.

EM: Are you currently involved in the Sacramento Indian Education Center?

LB: Yes, I'm a member of their program. And they've asked me to help out with their Christmas dinner, so I'll probably volunteer my time. I volunteer as much as I can, wherever they need to help.

EM: Have you held a job, besides all of this busy volunteer work, in Sacramento?

LB: Yes, I work for Department of Motor Vehicles. I'm a hearing transcriber typist.

EM: How long have you worked for Motor Vehicles?

LB: Ah, thirty-one years. It's a long time, hm?

EM: Was this job, begun after you left the Kleinsorge's?

LB: Uh, yes, it's um, I started to work in July of 1952.

EM: Do any of your family practice traditional crafts?

LB: Yes, my 18-year-old daughter does bead work, she makes necklaces. And, uh, my husband learned how to do silver work from, uh, Ben Night Horse. He makes belt buckles, and silver and turquoise rings, and bracelets and earrings.

EM: Where did he learn, uh, where did he learn this skill from Mr. Night Horse?

LB: In a school, over on uh, off of Hedge Avenue, Sierra School. He took it up at night, during his spare time, because he works during the day. He went to evening class. And, uh, Ben Night Horse is a good teacher. He taught him well.

EM: When did he take these classes?

LB: Oh that was about, about five years ago.

EM: And where did your daughter learn beading?

LB: She learned it from the teachers at the Sacramento Indian Center Education Program.

EM: Well, thank you very, very much, Mrs. Begay.

LB: You're welcome.